(Revised Synopsis)

# FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE FICTION OF INDU SUNDARESAN

**SUBMITTED TO**

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**BY**
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# Revised Synopsis of the Proposed Research

## 1. Title of the Research Proposal:

**Feminist Consciousness in the fiction of Indu Sundaresan**

## 2. Choice of the topic with reasoning or significance:

The very term 'Feminism' is observed to have come into usage from the west, with the beginning of the woman's movement in the 19th century. Today with the abundance of feminist critical theories, it is possible to read any text against the grain. Many of the writers, who write with the distinct feminist agenda of bringing to light the various discriminative lived realities that women are forced to exist in, can be analysed in the light of feminist theories. The feministic reading of fiction written by avowed feminist writers has yielded a rich harvest of feminist fiction in the last two centuries of Feminism. However, there are many women writers especially Indian by their birth and milieu, who though are aware of gender discrimination and patriarchal restrictions, still do not acknowledge themselves as feminists. In fact they are openly repulsive towards the feminist label, because of the restrictive and constraining identity that it offers. Madhu Kishwar, Shashi Deshpande are some of these writers who although have worked sensitively to solve many women centric issues that are specific to women, but have declined to be called as feminists. However, even a cursory reading of their writings yields rich feminist analysis revealing valid feminist questions inherent in abundance in them. It is on similar lines that Indu Sundaresan, who has written five novels based on history and a short story collection, which takes up contemporary setting, is not an avowed feminist. She does not write her fiction with overt feministic strain, but a close reading of it yields a consciousness which is feminist. That in all her fictional pieces, the major characters and protagonists are women, and it is their perspective that is primary and dominant, reveals the feminist mode that is active in her fiction. The women characters in her fiction seem to fit in Chaman Nahal's description that- "A woman should be aware, self-controlled, strong-willed, self-reliant and rational, having faith in the inner strength of womanhood. A meaningful change can be brought only from within by being free in the deeper psychic sense." It is the presence of such women with feminist consciousness that people Sundaresan's novels.

Hence, the present study is an attempt to interpret her fiction in the light of feminist literary theories and trace the feminist consciousness embedded in them.

**Indu Sundaresan:**

Indu Sundaresan is an Indian American writer who was born and brought up in India. Her father Captain R. Sundaresan was a fighter pilot with the Indian Air Force whose transfers made Indu's family live almost in all places in the country, giving them a chance to see most of the magnificent palaces and forts in India. Added to this rich firsthand knowledge of places, Indu's childhood was enlivened by innumerable stories of India's kings and queens, narrated by her father, who was an avid story teller, which probably nurtured her historical sense to a great extent.

Indu acquired an M.A. in Economics and an M.S. in Operations Research in USA and took up writing soon after. The first two novels that she wrote have not been published as she herself expresses that they were practice runs which taught her how to write a book with a proper beginning, middle, and end. However she soon found her forte in Historical novels and today she is the author of five novels and a collection of short stories. Her *The Twentieth Wife* won the Washington State Book Award and has been converted into a 42 episode television series called *Siyaasat* which was aired (with subtitles) on Netflix in most countries. She is also the recipient of the Light of India award for Excellence in Literature and her work has been translated into some 23 languages worldwide. Her '*The Taj Trilogy*' novels are translated into Tamil, her mother tongue, by her mother, Madhuram Sundaresan, and published by Vanathi Pathipaggam in Chennai, India.

Currently, she lives in Seattle, Washington area with her husband and her daughter.

**Details of her novels are as below:**

The set of the first three novels forms a trilogy- **The Taj Trilogy:**

i. ***The Twentieth Wife***: (2002) Charts the story of Mehrunissa from her birth in the desert of Qandahar in 1577 till her marriage with Emperor Jahangir in 1611

ii. ***The Feast of Roses***: (2003) Mehrunnissa's journey through the political intrigues to becoming Empress Nurjahan, the strongest woman in the empire. The novel begins in 1611 till the death of Jahangir and the coming to throne of Shahjahan in 1628

iii. ***Shadow Princess***: (2010) Highlights the powerful princess Jahanhara, Shahjahan's favourite daughter and the fight for power between the four princes that leads to Aurangzeb's accession to the throne and forced house arrest of Emperor Shahjahan and his death. The period from 1631 to 1668 is traced.

iv. ***The Splendour of Silence***: (2006) this novel is set in a fictional Indian princely state just before Indian independence in 1947.

v. ***The Mountain of Light***: (2013) is a brilliant tale of love, adventure, loss, and betrayal, wrapped around the glowing heart of one of the world's most famous diamonds, the Kohinoor. The period between 1817 to 1893 is covered

vi. ***In the Convent of Little Flowers*** (2008) is a Collection of Short stories

It's no mean achievement for a woman to have attempted the herculean task of recreating the stupendous times of the magnificent Mughal era in the Indian history in her 'The Taj Triology.' It can be seen that Mughal era has been revisited by ample writers, but what makes Sundaresan's recreation is her unveiling of the power of the veiled women who had a tremendous impact on the course of Mughal history. The routinely recounted stories of Mughal emperors from Babur right down to Bahadur Shah Zafar highlighting their 'his'-stories are available, but the attempts of tracing the hidden or muted 'her'-stories within them are sparse. And Indu Sundaresan's work assumes significance in identifying the 'sheroes' of Mughal period and retelling the history from their perspective giving a glimpse into the prohibited zenanas of those times. Be it Nurjahan, Ruqqayya Begum, Asmat Begum, Jagat Gosini, Arjumand, Jahanara and Roshanara who dominate the 'Taj Triology' all of them have a significant role to play in the shaping of the history, as many of the decisions taken in the court find their making within the closed doors of the harem. Again her historical imagination of colonial times have coloured her *The Splendour of Silence* and *The Mountain of Light*, where the main action has welded together with the historical impetus of those times. The contemporary realities of today's India find an apt expression in the

short stories in her *In the Convent of Little Flowers*, where her feminist consciousness addresses many of the contemporary gender issues.

Indu Sundaresan's fiction has been studied in bits and parts focusing on some aspects of her work, but an exhaustive research work on the entirety of her work has not been undertaken till date, which has been verified through a browsing of the records. Hence, the present study offers to study Indu Sundaresan's fiction from a feministic perspective which dominates all her work.

## 3. Statement of the problem:

To trace the feminist consciousness embedded in the fiction of Indu Sundaresan. The sources of agency and the strength of the 'sheroes' she presents, and their subversive strategies and protests to overcome the restrictive patriarchal order are analysed in order to understand the gender equations and the social hierarchical structures of the times.

## 4. **Review of the relevant literature** (noted works should be considered. The textbook reviews not allowed)

An overview of the research work and reviews on the fiction of Indu Sundaresan reveals that her fiction is well received, as she is one of the very few writers of Indian origin who have taken up history as resource to write her novels. The rewriting of history with primacy of women's voices, recording the forgotten or erased stories of women yields a completely different kaleidoscopic view of history. The genre –gender relationship has been focused in her novels leading to multifarious meanings and makes a significant contribution to the field of feminist historiography. Most of the research articles on her novels which are studied individually chart her as a feminist writer whose fiction yields a feminist analysis.

The literature reviewed is as below:

N.Subhadra Chari. International Journal Of English Language, Literature and Translation Studies (Ijelr)A Quarterly, Indexed, Refereed And Peer Reviewed Open Access International Journal Vol.3.Issue. 2.2016 (Apr-June)

In this article the researcher has tried to read Sundaresan's The Twentieth Wife in the light of 'ecriture feminine' propounded by Helene Cixous to script women's history disrupting the phallogocentric discourses that are restrictive of its expression. Nurjahan is portrayed as a new liberated woman, an embodiment of empowerment emancipated from patriarchal patterns thereby challenging the androcentric (male point of view) norms to ascertain the prominence of the Otherness (female point of view) in literary discourses.

---. "Feminist Themes In Indu Sundaresan's The Twentieth Wife." Vol. 3. Issue.2.,2016 (April-June)

This paper is yet another exploration of the Sundaresan's ambition to re-present femininity of Mughal royal ladies and their glorious life story in the historical novel *The Twentieth Wife*. The researcher charts the novel to exemplify Nurjahan's steadfast ambition to wield power and her achievement of the same in a patriarchal society.

---."Gender and Genre: Thematic Significance of Feminist Thoughts in Indu Sundaresan's The Taj Trilogy". International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities.Vol. V, Issue XII, December 2017

This paper aims to explore the author's theoretical implications of interrogating history through a feminist lens by unveiling the thematic significance of feminist thoughts in *The Taj Trilogy*. The researcher has commended the author's creativeness to re-imagine historical characters in feminist framework and to represent Mughal royal ladies as harbingers of feminist thoughts in historical fiction.

S. Revathi & Dr. A. Selvalakshmi "Power behind the Veil: The Empress Nur Jahan- Indu Sundaresan's *The Feast of Roses*" Language in India. 18:5 May 2018

The paper highlights Sundaresan's attempt to highlight the multi-faceted personality of Nurjahan in order to rightfully secure her place in Indian history.

Vriti Sharma. "Historical Fiction, Crossing Boundaries: Indu Sunderesan's *Twentieth Wife*." The Criterion: An International Journal in English Oct. 2015, vol.6 issue 5

The researcher Vriti Sharma highlights how Historical fiction has made reading and memorising of history convenient as compared to earlier times. She surmises that the genre and the writers have given new dimensions to the subject and it is in this light she appreciates Sundaresan's efforts to render unwieldy history palatable to the readers.

M. Andrew. "Histories that Matter: On the Limits of Gender and the Consequent Subjugation in Indu Sundaresan's *The Twentieth Wife.*" The Journal for English Language and Literary Studies January-March 2018. Vol. VIII. Issue I

The researcher analyses that her novels respectively conceived history as metaphor and then conceptual metaphor. Her novels project history as signifying not only one idea but also conceptual in encompassing one idea in terms of another idea. Her novels help one to link historical fact conceptually to post-modern facts that dominate today's ideology. Hence her novels as perforations of history as metaphor strategically negotiate a manipulative role of the modern times. The novelist reactivates history in conceptual terms in order to fix it in the performativity principle of post modernity. He further concludes that Indu confines her interest to the wants of her aristocratic readers rather than being a law giver, sensitizer of evil and promoter of peace. Evil disguises as love and the worst of it is seen in her novel. Vice visibly accompanies and follows love in her novels.

## 5. Objectives of the study:

The research aims in achieving the following objectives:

a. To study the subversive strategies adopted by women to overcome the patriarchal regimentation thrusted upon them.
b. To examine the gender hierarchies that map the lives of women who are delineated in the fiction of Indu Sundaresan.
c. To unravel the societal structures and the sexual politics that shape and impact the lives of women as depicted in the fiction.
d. To assess the impact of age, status on roles assigned to the women and the power associated at each stage.
e. To understand the values, thoughts, needs, desires and relationships of the women portrayed.
f. To explore the feminist consciousness as reflected in her fiction.
g. To analyse the gender-genre relationship in her novels.

## 6. Hypothesis of the study

The study assumes the existence of a feminist consciousness among the protagonists of the novel, so much that an underlying prototypical feminism can be unraveled, with all features leading to a full blown feminism.

## 7. The methodology comprising

### a. Methods of research:

The interpretative method of textual analysis will be followed. The fiction will be analysed in the light of feminist theories.

### b. Sampling design and assumptions:

Sampling is not applicable.

### c. Conceptual framework if any

Almost all studies on Feminism have a generalized conception that feminism in India has been adopted from western models and Indian women have gained their feminist awareness due to the western ideas and models of empowerment. The Women's liberation movement that swept through England, America and France in the early twentieth century with the pioneering theoretical works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf Kate Millet in England; Betty Freidan in America or Simon d' Beauvoir, Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and others in France is accounted for raising the feminist consciousness in India as well. However, a cursory glimpse into the historical past of India enables us to find almost a pantheon of women who were casually aware of their strengths and their rights in the society. In spite of a highly patriarchal social setup that India has had, there has been no dearth of women who have wielded power, made their choices and lived their lives with no inhibitions. The names of Maitreyi, Gargi in the vedic times, the women saints who emerged during the Bhakti movement like Meera, Janabai, Saku bai, Akkamahadevi and a hoard of sharaneys in the 12th century; the fiery

women who were the morning stars of Indian freedom movement like Rani Laxmi bai, Rani Kittur Channamma, Abakka Rani, Vanake Obavva, Belavadi Mallamma, Jija Mata, Rani Rudramahadevi and many Queens have been ubiquitous in being powerful and wielded swords to protect not themselves but their dynasties and kingdoms. What could be more representative of the existence of feminist consciousness in India, than the yeomen work done by Jothiba and Savitri bai Phule, who opened the doors of education to women even before the West had thought of it. All the women who pitched in the acquisition of freedom for India also endorse this argument.

Further, it is yet another popular conception that the arrival of the Muslim and the Mughal rule in India from 16$^{th}$ to 18$^{th}$ centuries augured ill and posed constraints for the development of women by pushing them behind the veils. But the historical records disprove these baseless assumptions, because a number of women have left their mark of their achievements during the 16th and 17th centuries. A cursory glance itself unravels names like Chand Bibi, Razia Sultana, Nurjahan, Ruqayya Begum, Gulbadan, Maham Anga and many others all of who have left the imprint of their strength and achievements on the historical time lines.

So, the existence of strong undercurrents of feminist consciousness can be easily traced among Indian women. There is no dearth of models of strong Indian women who might not have left any well documented theories for women's emancipation, but nonetheless they have lived their lives according to the dictates of their desires. All this testifies that feminist awakening in India did not come from the West, but made itself manifest many times all through the annals of Indian history.

It is in the backdrop of this conceptual framework that the present study of the fiction of Indu Sundaresan will be analysed to reflect on the currents of feminist consciousness existing in the medieval, colonial and contemporary times amidst attempts to stifle them by the Patriarchal controls. An attempt to trace the threads of prototypical feminism as it existed in India during changing times from Medieval times to the Contemporary times through the colonial period is made.

d. Research design (explanation of how research is being conducted and the tools used for the same)

The design of the research work to be carried out for three years according to the division of time frame is as below:

- The first term of six months: Course work
- The second term of six months: Close Reading of the Primary Sources and recording the first impressions.
- The third term of six months: Visits to libraries to collect the secondary Sources and analyzing them. An attempt to interview the Author in the light of arguments formulated.
- The fourth term of six months: Penning the First draft of Thesis under the research guide's supervision
- The fifth term of six months: The revision of the Thesis in consultation with the guide and Colloquium
- The Sixth term of six months: The final revision of the thesis with the suggestions made by the experts in the Colloquium and Submission of the final copy of the thesis.

**e. Methods of data collection**

Primary and secondary sources will be collected from visits to libraries within the country. Internet resources will be tapped through advanced browsing strategies.

f. **Methods of data analysis** (use of parametric and non-parametric tools and techniques as the case may be)

Textual analysis of the data with close-reading techniques will be followed. The researcher also proposes to follow eighth edition of MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers for citation and documentation.

8. **The chapter scheme**: (objectives must be reflected in the scheme)

A tentative chapter scheme is as below:

- **Chapter One:** Introduction- In order to study the feminist consciousness, it is necessary to define and find out the meaning of feminism and feminist consciousness and to understand social, political, historical and cultural dimensions of the term. Therefore, this chapter focuses on feminisms, their growth and reach in the world and India in particular recounting the work of major theorists in the field. This chapter also encloses a brief review of relevant literature.
- **Chapter Two:** The life and literary works of Indu Sundaresan, her impulses, authorial motives and her stand in the literary world is assessed.
- **Chapter Three:** Feminist Consciousness in *The Taj Trilogy*. The nexus between the Historical Fiction and Feminism will be studied showing how recreation of history from women's perspective becomes a tool of feminist awakening. This chapter while studying the theoretical implications of a feminist recreation of history that is endorsed as being overtly patriarchal also delves into the relationship between the genre and gender.
- **Chapter Four:** The feminist consciousness in *The Splendor of Silence* and *The Mountain of Light*, both set in the Colonial period of India.
- **Chapter Five:** Feminist Consciousness in *The Convent of Little Flowers*, the short stories which picture the contemporary times.
- **Chapter Six:** Conclusion.

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